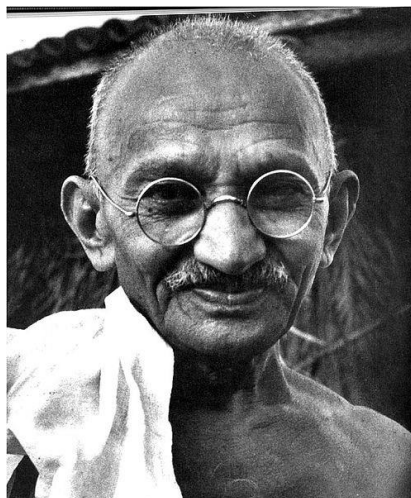


## Gandhiji, I Profess to Know

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I was born two and half years after Gandhiji's death, so I never saw him in flesh and blood. Hence all my understanding of him has come from meeting people who knew him and from reading about him and his writings.

Thus, I am going to narrate anecdotes about him from people who met and worked with him. These anecdotes have not been written and I am afraid will be lost; hence my desire to narrate them.

Also, the anecdotes help describe a person in human terms. No matter how great the soul is once it acquires a human body then it is guided by the frailties of human existence.

Gandhi was no different. Many times, he said that he was an ordinary human being but sometimes when truth spoke through him, he became a superhuman being capable of moving millions of his countrymen and doing wonderful things. Thus, he was a medium of higher forces, and it is my belief that all great historical figures are such mediums whether good or evil.

My father, [Jagdish Prasad Rajvanshi](#) – a freedom fighter, told me a remarkable episode about Gandhiji. It happened sometime in 1941. Gandhiji was supposed to give a speech in Allahabad where he wanted to spell out his ideas about the [‘Quit India’ movement](#). It was an important speech, and all the great leaders of

the independence movement were present. There were about 5-10 lakh people in the grounds and there was much din and noise. Hence it was difficult to hear what the leaders were saying. Again and again [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) and [Acharya Kriplani](#) would come to the mike and tell people to remain quiet so that they can hear their leaders speak. But to no avail. Gandhiji was late in coming to the meeting. Once he came, he got on the dais and put a finger on his lip. A wave of silence spread over the field starting from the dais.

My father said he never saw such a thing in his life where a small frail man exerted so much power just by his presence and in a very non-violent way! [My father went to jail with Gandhiji](#) during the 1942 movement. He and his young colleagues (they were all in 20-25 years age group) were inspired by Hitler. His fiery speeches that they heard on radio (and hardly understood them since they were in German) somehow inspired them. But this episode was a reminder to them of higher thought of Gandhi.

### **Gandhiji's Aura and Presence**

Gandhiji had a presence. That is a mark of a great soul and a very evolved spiritual being. [To Gandhiji spirituality came first](#). Other things like politics, public life etc. were by-products of his spirituality. There are many instances where people spoke about his aura or presence. Whether they were just awed by him or he really had a mind-bending presence is difficult to say but it did exist, nevertheless. Almost anybody who came in contact with him was influenced by his thoughts and ideas.

My father's friend late Shri [Ratan Lal Joshi](#) who was editor of Hindustan and was also involved in freedom movement told me of an anecdote.

A well-known writer from Allahabad who was also a friend of Shri. Joshi used to write about Gandhiji's sexual experiments in a very derogatory manner. He thought that Gandhi was a sexual pervert and had gone senile. Gandhiji apparently wanted to meet him and discuss with him the issue. A message was

therefore sent through Ratan Lal Joshi that he should come and meet Gandhiji about this issue.

The writer was thrilled, and he prepared a four-page questionnaire about Gandhi's sexual experiments. Both he and Shri. Joshi went to see Gandhiji. He asked the writer about his family, what his children were doing and told him that since he was such a good writer, instead of writing about his sexual experiments he should focus on good things and write about Raja Harish Chandra! – someone that the writer used to hate and thought that it was another of Gandhi's fads to talk all the time about Harish Chandra.

All the interview time of 45 minutes was taken up in this chit chat. After the interview Shri. Joshi asked him why he did not ask those questions. The writer said that he could not get the courage to ask them!

A similar story was told to me by [Lavanam](#). He was forced to join Sevagram Ashram in Wardha when he was 10-12 years of age. His parents [Gora](#) and Saraswati Gora, a great social reformer couple and atheist, were followers of Gandhi and lived in Sevagram. They decided to yank Lavanam out of the school and give him "*Nai Taaleem*" (new education) based on Gandhiji's concept of imparting education through manual work and handicrafts.

In 1996 I was invited to attend a conference entitled "Mahatma Gandhi's Relevance for 21<sup>st</sup> Century". This conference was held in [CCMB Hyderabad](#) and was organized by my former professor [Dr. V. Balasubramaniam](#) who was the director of CCMB.

I roomed with Lavanam during the conference and requested him to tell me some anecdotes about Gandhiji. He said that his job in the Ashram was to cut vegetables and fruits. He used to hate it since he always felt that he should be attending school and not doing this manual work. Everyday Gandhiji would pass him on his way to his bath after his massage. He did not say anything to him

but used to smile. This went on for almost a month. One day while going to his bath Gandhiji asked Lavanam what he was doing.

Being a young impetuous boy who was already peeved with this type of work he replied “Don’t you see what I am doing? Gandhiji said yes, I can see that but have you tasted the fruits to see whether they are sweet or good.

Lavanam replied indignantly “How can I taste them? They will become *Jhutha* as they are for the Ashram”. Gandhi said, “If I were in your place, I would taste them and since nobody is watching, it does not matter”. Lavanam told him that this is untruthful and not correct to which Gandhi replied, “You a 16-year-old want to teach me, the Pujari of truth about what is correct and incorrect?” and then he had a hearty laugh.

Lavanam said that in those few minutes of exchange Gandhi came to his level and put him at ease and became a great friend. Though a great comradeship developed between Lavanam and Gandhi, Lavanam said that living in Sevagram was a mind-bending exercise. It was impossible to think critically and straight – such was the power of thought of Gandhi.

[Shri. B. B. Vohra](#), who was a like an uncle to me and retired as the Chairman Advisory Board of Energy during Rajiv Gandhi’s time told me another anecdote.

In January 1948 he and his young friends came to Delhi from Punjab since they wanted to see Gandhi as it was rumored that he may die any day since there had been many attempts on his life. Shri. B. B. Vohra told me that they walked few steps behind Gandhiji to the prayer meeting and his skin was glowing like copper. Vohra ji also told me that it was biting cold that day and he and his friends were wearing long johns, boots, overcoats, and warm caps while Gandhiji was going to the prayer meeting in the evening in sandals and without a cap, had a simple khadi shawl on his body, and wearing a dhoti which left half of his legs uncovered! Like a great Yogi he had mastered the elements, so he was not bothered by them.

There were few residents in Sabarmati Ashram who somehow were not touched by the mind-bending atmosphere of Gandhiji. One was my wife's grandmother [Kamala Nimbkar \(nee Elizabeth Lundy\)](#). She was an American lady who had married Vishnu Nimbkar in 1931. One of the conditions that Vishnu Nimbkar had put to her for marrying him and living in India was that she had to live very frugally. It was therefore decided that she will live in Sabarmati Ashram with Gandhiji and imbibe Indian values of frugality and manual labor. She stayed in the Ashram for 3-4 months in late 1930. Elizabeth Lundy was the only other white woman besides [Meera Behn](#) (Madeleine Slade) in Sabarmati Ashram.

It was a tradition in the Ashram that all girls would write diaries of their dreams, and these were discussed the next day in the Ashram meeting. According to Kamala Nimbkar this was an invasion of privacy and she felt that dreams are extremely private and hence she refused to write them. There was a minor tremor in the Ashram since nobody till that time had refused Gandhiji's rules.

Meera Behn got very upset. She being quite a neurotic woman, took upon herself the task of creating an opinion against Kamala Nimbkar in the Ashram and with Gandhiji. It was Gandhi who put down this tempest in the teapot by saying that if Kamala Nimbkar does not want to write her diary then it is fine with him.

### **Gandhiji's frailties**

Gandhiji had his share of human frailties. He was quite a bully and he had fixed ideas about lots of things. [Nirmal Kumar Bose](#) who was his secretary during his Noakhali trip in West Bengal in 1947 wrote that Gandhi would get very upset if the person who was assigned the work did not do it. This was despite the fact that the work was done by somebody else. He felt that there should be a discipline in the work force and so he acted many times as a military commander who wanted all his troops to do their assigned work without questioning.

Thus, whatever Gandhiji wanted either in the Ashram or in the Congress Party took place. Shri. Ratan Lal Joshi told me another anecdote about this aspect of

Gandhiji. It was a common practice in the congress working committee meetings for Gandhiji to ask all the members their opinion on a particular matter and how they would like to proceed on it. Shri. Rajendra Prasad who later on became the first President of India and was a great congress leader and a close associate of Gandhi once remarked “Bapu why do you do this drama of taking our opinions. Ultimately what you want and have decided will only happen”. Joshi told me that Gandhi had a hearty laugh at this comment.

He was also quite harsh on his family. His poor treatment of his sons and his wife Kasturba are well documented. He threw out his sister and her husband from the Sabarmati Ashram when he found out that they could not account for few paisa discrepancy in the Ashram accounts.

Bullies always admire the people who can stand up to them. Maybe that was reason why Gandhi chose Nehru over [Vallabhbhai Patel](#). Patel did everything that Gandhi asked him to do whereas Nehru was quite critical and had major differences of opinion with Gandhi on various issues. Besides Gandhiji felt intuitively that Nehru being much younger than Patel will be able to guide the destiny of India for a longer time.

Gandhi was brutally honest about his actions, life, and anything he did. This included his sexual experiments of sleeping naked with his grandniece and others. In this he was following the ancient Indian tradition of testing his celibacy by exposing himself to the temptations of human flesh. Specifically, he was following [Shri. Ramakrishna's](#) example of sleeping naked with his wife and then going in Samadhi at the sight of his wife's body. Gandhi never went into Samadhi but just went to sleep. Both [Nirmal Kumar Bose](#) and [Ved Mehta](#) have described this aspect of Gandhi's life in detail.

Gandhiji did these sexual experiments during the last years of his life. I do not know what he was trying to prove but there is a strong connection between sex and death and intuitively he felt that his days on this earth were numbered.

Since he had taken a vow of celibacy, his sleeping with naked women was an act of sublimating his sexual desires rather than consuming them.

Though he was a great soul I feel he was a very tortured human being in the last days of his life. With the stench of death all around him both in [Noakhali](#) and other places, he felt that his edifice of non-violence had collapsed. He said many times that he saw darkness everywhere. He still tried to bring peace through his superhuman efforts of fasting in his last days, but he understood intuitively that his non-violent mission had been a lost cause.

It is also a sad fact that the number of people who died in Hindu-Muslim riots (about 1.5-2 million) were nearly the same numbers as those who died in the Second World War. A nation which produced a great prophet of non-violence (to some the greatest *pujari* of non-violence after Buddha) had to see the greatest act of violence in its history.

### **A Karma Yogi and an Engineer**

Gandhiji was a great karma yogi who believed in the power of action and work. He never believed in any palmist, soothsayer etc. Shri Ratan Lal Joshi told me of an incident when a palmist went to Gandhiji to see his palm and maybe predict his future. He was informed that he will have to wait since Gandhiji was spinning his charkha. After a couple of hours of waiting the palmist enquired as to how long he will have to wait further. Gandhiji informed him, “Till I get *Sampoorn Swarajya* (complete freedom from British)”!

Gandhiji was a multi-faceted human being. Endowed with a very powerful mind he thought deeply on all the issues affecting him and the nation. Thus, how to have a good diet, keeping a healthy body and how to get rid of British were all equally important for him. Thus, one issue of [“Young India”](#) (a weekly paper that Gandhiji published) carried an article on how to get rid of constipation and the importance of Gandhi-Irvin pact. To him both these things had equal importance.

Gandhi ji as the *pujari* (priest) of nonviolence used it for everything including industrialization. He rightly thought the industrialization of 1920s to be a violent system with heavy machinery, very inefficient energy and materials conversion technologies and no concern for the environment. Intuitively he revolted against those systems and felt that simple life (with few needs) and most of the daily things to be produced from locally available materials was nonviolent and in tune with the nature.

There are lots of articles written to show how Gandhi ji was anti-technology and anti-science. He was neither. In fact, he was the *pujari* or worshipper of human body (the greatest machine ever designed by nature) and hence could never be anti-technology. He wrote about this issue couple of times since he was sensitive to this criticism.

In his life he used the latest technologies of his time; telephones, telegraph, trains, cars, ships, etc. What he rebelled against was the exploitative nature of technology and big machines of that time for poor masses. Intuitively he felt that [decentralization and sustainable development](#) was the solution to remove the poverty of rural poor.

Gandhi ji was **an engineer at heart**. He improvised on many things like better snake catching equipment; small cotton spinning wheel (*takli*); *chappals* (sandals) made from used tyres, etc. In 1929 he even instituted a Rs. One lakh prize (Rs. 20 crores in today's value and 2.6 times bigger than the Nobel Prize!) for the design of an excellent *charkha*.

Such things could not come from an anti-technology person but from an innovator and an engineer. This is the hallmark of a great mind since it can produce original ideas in whichever field it becomes interested in. Had Gandhi lived in the present times he would have embraced the latest technology of 3D printing, cell phones, enhanced rural mobility, etc., since it allowed decentralized development and helped in the improvement of lives of rural population.



His dream of giving employment and decent life to rural population may therefore become possible with the availability of these energy-efficient and high-tech systems. He always believed in following nature which today is called biomimicry and believed in achieving more from less resources. This has given rise to new technological concept called [frugal innovations](#).

Besides, he actively talked and wrote about moral issues and Karma Yoga. Thus, he combined in one person a commander of independence movement, promoter of peace, creator of a new thought of non-violent *Satyagraha*, and advocate of wholesome and healthy life. *To my mind the only other person who combined all these qualities was Prophet Mohammad in 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.*

Because of this multi-facet personality of Gandhi none of his followers became his true disciples. They could only follow one aspect of his personality. For example [Vinoba Bhave](#) was his spiritual disciple, Morarji Desai his disciple for naturopathy, [J. C. Kumarappa](#) was his disciple for rural development etc., Nehru never believed in any of his philosophies and was a rebel.

### **Ahead of His Time**

Gandhiji was far ahead of his times. His 1930 Round Table Conference Speech in London is a masterpiece on the issue of North-South cooperation. He talked about commonwealth of Britain and Independent India and said the combined economics of these countries can help the world. Similarly, he showed the way for sustainable development by his own example of living simply and producing highest quality of thought. His intuitive thinking of self-sufficient and sustainable rural economy is an idea in vogue and which he propagated and wrote about in 1920s. I think [his ideas on sustainability are more relevant today than any time before](#).

In 2002 I spend almost half day in [Sabarmati Ashram](#) looking at the architecture of the Ashram and also spending quite some time in their library trying to understand why Gandhiji chose this place.

The Ashram, situated on the banks of shrunken and polluted Sabarmati River, was desolate and quite hot. But the old photographs that I saw in the library showed that it was full of trees and with cool breeze coming over the full Sabarmati River it must have been a pleasant place to live even without electricity. I think Gandhiji was quite a clever person who chose places which had pleasant surroundings, so he could live with minimum external energy inputs like electricity for fans etc.

Gandhiji's greatest asset was that he carried every Indian with him. That is the hallmark of a great leader. There were other great leaders in last century like Mao, Hitler, Stalin, and others but they led their countrymen with force and fear. Gandhi led Indians by love and higher thought and that is the mark of a great soul.

At the time of his death almost the whole country mourned. [My mother](#) who had never met Gandhiji told me that there was no food cooked in the house on that day since everybody felt that a close member of the family had died. In millions of homes throughout India similar grief was witnessed on that day. That could only happen because every Indian identified with Gandhiji as one of their own – a mark of a great and noble soul, almost bordering on divine. No wonder [Einstein wrote](#) “Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.’

The ultimate tribute to him was given by his rebel heir Jawahar Lal Nehru when he said *“The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere. .... For the light that shone in this country was no ordinary light.....and a thousand years later, that light will be seen in this country and the world will see it and it will give solace to innumerable hearts”*.

[HOME](#)

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I have written quite a number of articles on Gandhiji. [They are available here.](#)